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Abstract

Introduction

This article is about the transformation of coffee, from having no place in the everyday lives of the people of Bangladesh, to a new position as a harbinger of liberal values and Western culture. The context is a group of Australian photojournalism students who embarked on a month-long residency in Bangladesh; the content is a Nescafé advertisement encouraging the young, middle-class Bangladesh audience to consume coffee, in a marketing campaign that promotes "my first cup." For the Australian students, the marketing positioning of this advertising campaign transformed instant coffee into a strange and unfamiliar commodity. At the same time, the historic association between Bangladesh and tea prompted one of the photographers to undertake her own journey to explore the hidden side of that other Western staple. This paper explores the tradition of tea culture in Bangladesh and the marketing campaign for instant coffee within this culture, combining the authors' experiences and perspectives. The outline of the Photomedia unit in the Bachelor of Creative Industries degree that the students were working towards at Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Australia states that:

> students will engage with practices, issues and practicalities of working as a photojournalist in an international, cross cultural context. Students will work in collaboration with students of Pathshala: South Asian Institute of Photography, Dhaka Bangladesh in the research, production and presentation of stories related to Bangladeshi society and culture for distribution to international audiences (ECU).

The sixteen students from Perth, living and working in Bangladesh between 5 January and 7 February 2012, exhibited a diverse range of cultures, contexts, and motivations. Young Australians, along with a number of ECU's international students, including some from Norway, China and Sweden, were required to learn first-hand about life in Bangladesh, one of the world's poorest and most densely populated countries.

Danielle Fusco and ECU lecturer Duncan Barnes collaborated with staff and students of Pathshala, South Asian Media Institute (Pathshala). Their recollections and observations on tea production and the location are central to this article but it is the questions asked by the group about the marketing of instant coffee into this culture that provides its tensions. Fusco completed a week-long induction and then travelled in Bangladesh for a fortnight to research and photograph individual stories on rural and urban life. Barnes here sets the scene for the project, describing the expectations and what actually happened:

When we travel to countries that are vastly different to our own it is often to seek out that difference; to go in search of the romanticised ideals that have been portrayed as paradise in films, books and photographs. "The West" has long been fascinated with "The East" (Said) and for the past half century, since the hippie treks to Marrakesh and Afghanistan, people have journeyed overland to the Indian sub-continent, both from Europe and from Australia, yearning for a cultural experience they cannot find at home. Living in Perth, Western Australia, sometimes called the most isolated capital city in the world, that pull to something "different" is like a magnet.

Upon arrival in Dhaka, you find yourself deliciously overwhelmed by the heavy traffic, the crowded markets, the spicy foods and the milky lassie drinks. It only takes a few stomach upsets to make your Western appetite start kicking in and you begin craving things you have at home but that are hard to find in Bangladesh. Take coffee for example. I recently completed a month-long visit to Bangladesh, which, like India, is a nation of tea drinkers. Getting any kind of good coffee requires that you be in what expatriates call "the Golden Triangle" of Dhaka city—within the area contained by Gulshan-Banani-Baridhara. Here you find the embassies and a sizeable expatriate community that constitutes a Western bubble unrepresentative of Bangladesh beyond these districts.

Coffee World is an example of a Western-style café chain that, as the name suggests, serves coffee beverages. It has trouble making a quality flat white. The baristas are poorly trained, the service is painfully slow, yet the prices are comparable to those in the West. Even with these disadvantages, it is frequented by Westerners who also make use of the free WiFi. In contrast, tea is available at every road junction for around 5 cents Australian. It's ready in seconds: the kettle is always hot due to a constant turnover of local customers.

It was the history of tea growing in Bangladesh, and a desire to know more about a commodity that people in the West take for granted, that most attracted Fusco's interest. She chose to focus on Bangladesh's oldest commercial tea garden (plantation) Sylhet, which has been in production since 1857 (Tea Board). As is the case with many tea farms in the Indian sub-continent, the workers at Sylhet are part of Bangladesh's Hindu minority. Fusco left Dhaka and travelled into the rural areas to investigate tea production:

Venturing into these estates from the city is like entering an entirely different world. They are isolated places, and although they are close in distance, they are completely separate from the main city. Spending time in the Khadim tea estate amongst the plantations and the workers' compounds made me very aware of the strong relationship that exists between them.

The Hindu teaching of Samsara refers to the continuous cycle of repeated birth, life, death and rebirth [Hinduism], which became a metaphor for me, for this relationship I was experiencing. It is clear that neither farm [where the tea is grown] nor village [which houses the people] could live without each other. The success and maintenance of the tea farm relies on the workers just as much as the workers rely on the tea gardens for their livelihood and sustenance. Their life cycles are intertwined and in synch.

There are many problems in the compounds. The people are extremely poor. Their education opportunities are limited, and they work incredibly hard for very little money for their entire lives. They are bound to stay and work here and as those generations before them, were born, worked and died here, living their whole lives in the community of the tea farm.

By documenting the lives of the people, I realised I was documenting the process of the lives of the tea trees at the same time. This is how I met Lolita.

Figure 1. Bangladeshi tea worker, Lolita, stands in a small section of the Khadim tea plantation in the early morning. Sylhet, Bangladesh (Danielle Fusco, Jan. 2012).Figure 1. Bangladeshi tea worker, Lolita, stands in a small section of the Khadim tea plantation in the early morning. Sylhet, Bangladesh (Danielle Fusco, Jan. 2012).

This woman emulated everything I was seeing and feeling about the village and the garden. She spoke about the reliance on the trees, especially because of the money and, therefore, the food, they provide for her and her husband.

I became aware of the injustice of this system because the workers are paid so little while this industry is booming. It was obvious that life here is far from perfect, but as Lolita explains, they make do. She has worked on the tea estate for decades. As her husband is no longer working, she is the primary income earner. They are able, however, to live in relative comfort now their children have all married and left and it is just the two of them.

Lolita describes that money lies within these trees. Money for her means that she can eat that day. Money for the managers means industrial success. Either way, whether it is in the eyes of the individual or the industry, tea always comes down to Taka [the currency of Bangladesh].

Marketing Coffee in a Culture of Tea and Betel Nut

With such a strong culture of tea production and consumption and a coffee culture just existing on the fringe, a campaign by Nescafé to encourage Bangladeshi consumers to have "my first cup" of Nescafé instant coffee at the time of this study captured the imagination of the students. How effective can the marketing of Nescafé instant coffee be in a society that is historically a producer and consumer of tea, and which also still embraces the generations-old use of the betel nut as an everyday stimulant?

Although it only employs some 150,000 (Islam et al.) in a nation of 150 million people, tea makes an important contribution to the Bangladesh economy. Shortly after the 1971 civil war, in which East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) became independent from West Pakistan (now Pakistan), the then-Chairman of the Bangladesh Tea

Board, writing in *World Development,* commented:

> In the highly competitive marketing environment of today it is extremely necessary for the tea industry of Bangladesh to increase production by raising the per acre yield, improve quality by adoption of finer plucking standards and modernization of factories and reduce per unit cost of production so as to be able to sell more of our teas to foreign markets and thereby earn higher amounts of much needed foreign exchange for the country as well as generate additional resources within the industry for ploughing back for further development (Ali 55).

In Bangladesh, tea is a cash crop that, even in the 1970s following vicious conflicts, is more than capable of meeting local demand and producing an export dividend. Coffee is imported commodity that, historically, has had little place in Bangladeshi life or culture. However important tea is, it is not the traditional Bangladesh stimulant. Instead, over the years, when people in the West would have had a cup of tea or coffee and/or a cigarette, most Bangladeshis have turned to the betel nut.

A 2005 study of 100 citizens from Araihazar, Bangladesh, conducted by researchers from Columbia University, found that coffee consumption is "very low in this population" (Hafeman et al. 567). The purpose of the study was to assess the impact of betel quids (the wad of masticated nut) and the chewing of betel nuts, upon tremor. For this reason, it was important to record the consumption of stimulants in the 98 participants who progressed to the next stage of the study and took a freehand spiral-drawing test. While "26 (27%) participants had chewed betel quids, 23 (23%) had smoked one or more cigarettes, [and] 14 (14%) drank tea; on that day, only 1 (1%) drank caffeinated soda, and none (0%) drank coffee" (Hafeman et al. 568). Given its addictive and carcinogenic properties (Sharma), the people who chewed betel quids were more likely to exhibit tremor in their spiral drawings than the people who did not.

As this (albeit small) study suggests, the preferred Bangladeshi stimulant is more likely to be betel or tobacco rather than a beverage. Insofar as hot drinks are consumed, Bangladesh citizens drink tea. This poses a significant challenge for multinational advertisers who seek to promote the consumption of instant coffee as a means of growing the global market for Nescafé.

Marketing Nescafé to Bangladesh

In Dhaka, in January 2012, the television campaign slogan for Nescafé is "My first cup", with the tagline, "Time you started." This Nescafé television commercial (NTC) impressed itself upon the Australian visitors, both in terms of its frequency of broadcast and in its referencing of Western culture and values. (The advertisement can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2E8mFX43oAM). The NTC's three stars, Vir Das, Purab Kohli, and leading Bollywood actress Deepika Padukone, are highly-recognisable to young Bangladeshi audiences and the storyline is part of a developing series of advertisements which together form a mini-soap opera, like that used so successfully to advertise the Nescafé Gold Blend brand of instant coffee in the West in the 1980s to 1990s (O'Donohoe 242; Beale).

The action takes place in Kohli's affluent, Western-style apartment. The drama starts with Das challenging Kohli regarding whether he has successfully developed a relationship with his attractive neighbour, Padukone. Using a combination of local language with English words and sub-titles, the first sequence is captioned: "Any progress with Deepika, or are you still mixing coffee?" Suggesting incredulity, and that he could do better, Das asks Kohli, according to the next subtitle, "What are you doing dude?" The use of the word "dude" clearly refers to American youth culture, familiar in such movies as *Dude, where's my car?* This is underlined by the immediate transition to the English words of "bikes ... biceps ... chest ... explosion." Of these four words only "chest" is pronounced in the local tongue, although all four words are included as captions in English.

Kohli appears less and less impressed as Das becomes increasingly insistent, with Das going on to express frustration with Kohli through the exclamation "u don't even have a plan." The use of the text-speak English "u" here can be constructed as another way of persuading young Bangladeshi viewers that this advertisement is directed at them: the "u" in place of "you" is likely to annoy their English-speaking elders. Das continues speaking in his mother tongue, with the subtitle "Deepika padukone [sic] is your neighbour and you are only drinking coffee," with the subsequent subtitle emphasising: "Deepika and only coffee." At this point, Padukone enters the apartment through the open door without knocking and confidently says "Hi." Kohli explains the situation by responding (in English, and subtitled) "my school friend, Das". Padukone, in turn, responds in a friendly way to both men (in English, and subtitled) "You guys want to have coffee?"

Instead of responding directly to this invitation, Das models to Kohli what it is to take the initiative in this situation: what it is to have a plan. "Hello" (he says, in English and subtitled) "I don't have coffee but I have a plan. You and me, my bike, right now, hit the town, party!" Kohli looks down at the floor, embarrassed, while Padukone looks quizzically at him over Das's shoulder. Kohli smiles, and points to himself and Padukone, clearly excluding Das: "I will have coffee" (in English, and subtitle). "Better plan", exclaims Padukone, "You and me, my place, right now, coffee." She looks challengingly at Das: "Right?," a statement rather than a request, and exits, with Kohli following and Das left behind in the apartment. Cue voice-over (not a subtitle, but in-screen speech bubble) "[It's] time you started" (spoken) "the new Nescafé" (shot change) "My first cup" (with an in-screen price promotion).

This commercial associates coffee drinking with Western values of social and personal autonomy. For young women in the traditional Muslim culture of Bangladesh, it suggests a world in which they are at liberty to spend time with the suitors they choose, ignoring those whom they find pushy or inappropriate, and free to invite a man back to "my place, right now" for coffee. The scene setting in this advertisement and the use of English in both the spoken and written text suggests its target is the educated middle class, and indicates that sophisticated, affluent, trend-setters drink coffee as a part of getting to know their neighbours. In line with this, the still which ends the commercial promotes the Facebook page "Know your neighbours."

The flirtatious nature of the actors in the advertisement, the emphasis on each of the male characters spending time alone with the female character, and the female character having both power and choice in this situation is likely to be highly unacceptable to traditional Bangladeshi parental values and, therefore, proportionately more exciting to the target audience. The underlying suggestion of "my first cup" and "time you started" is that the social consumption of that first cup of coffee is the "first step" to becoming more Western. The statement also has overtones of sexual initiation. The advertisement aligns itself with the world portrayed in the Western media consumed in Bangladesh, and the implication is that—even if Western liberal values are not currently a possible choice for all—it is at least feasible to start on the journey towards these values through drinking that first cup of coffee.

Unbeknownst to the Bangladesh audience, this Nescafé marketing strategy echoes, in almost all material particulars, the same approach that was so successful in persuading Australians to embrace instant coffee. Khamis, in her essay on Australia and the convenience of instant coffee, argues that, while in 1928 Australia had the highest per capita consumption of tea in the world, this had begun to change by the 1950s. The transformation in the market positioning of coffee was partly achieved through an association between tea and old-fashioned 'Britishness' and coffee and the United States:

> this discovery [of coffee] spoke to changes in Australia's lifestyle options: the tea habit was tied to Australia's development as a far-flung colonial outpost, a daily reminder that many still looked to London as the nation's cultural capital: the growing appeal of instant coffee reflected a widening and more nuanced cultural palate. This was not just 'another' example of the United States postwar juggernaut; it marks the transitional phase in Australia's history, as its cultural identity was informed less by the staid conservativism of Britain than the heady flux of New World glamour (219).

Coffee was associated with the USA not simply through advertising but also through cultural exposure. By 1943, notes Khamis, there were 120,000 American service personnel stationed in Australia and she quotes Symons (168) as saying that "when an American got on a friendly footing with an Australian family he was usually found in the kitchen, teaching the Mrs how to make coffee, or washing the dishes" (168, cited in Khamis 220). The chances were that "the Mrs"—the Australian housewife—felt she needed the tuition: an Australian survey conducted by Gallup in March 1950 indicated that 55 per cent of respondents at that time had never tried coffee, while a further 24 per cent said they "seldom" consumed it (Walker and Roberts 133, cited in Khamis 222).

In a newspaper article titled, "Overpaid, Oversexed and Over Here", Munro describes the impact of exposure to the first American troops based in Australia during this time, with a then seven year old recalling: "They were foreign, quite a different culture from us. They spoke more loudly than us. They had strange accents, cute expressions, they were really very exotic." The American troops caused consternation for Australian fathers and boyfriends. Dulcie Wood was 18 when she was dating an American serviceman:

> They had more money to spend (than Australian troops). They seemed to have plenty of supplies, they were always bringing you presents—stockings and cartons of cigarettes [...] Their uniforms were better. They took you to more places. They were quite good dancers, some of them. They always brought you flowers. They were more polite to women. They charmed the mums because they were very polite. Some dads were a bit more sceptical of them. They weren't sure if all that charm was genuine (quoted in Munro).

Darian-Smith argues that, at that time, Australian understanding of Americans was based on Hollywood films, which led to an impression of American technological superiority and cultural sophistication (215-16, 232). "Against the American-style combination of smart advertising, consumerism, self-expression and popular democracy, the British class system and its buttoned-up royals appeared dull and dour" writes Khamis (226, citing Grant 15)—almost as dull and dour as 1950s tea compared with the postwar sophistication of Nescafé instant coffee.

Conclusion

The approach Nestlé is using in Bangladesh to market instant coffee is tried and tested: coffee is associated with the new, radical cultural influence while tea and other traditional stimulants are relegated to the choice of an older, more staid generation. Younger consumers are targeted with a romantic story about the love of coffee, reflected in a mini-soap opera about two people becoming a couple over a cup of Nescafé.

Hopefully, the Pathshala-Edith Cowan University collaboration is at least as strong. Some of the overseas visitors return to Bangladesh on a regular basis—the student presentations in 2012 were, for instance, attended by two visiting graduates from the 2008 program who were working in Bangladesh. For the Australian participants, the association with Pathshala, South Asian Media Institute, and Drik Photo Agency brings recognition, credibility and opportunity. It also offers a totally new perspective on what to order in the coffee queue once they are home again in Australia.

Postscript

The final week of the residency in Bangladesh was taken up with presentations and a public exhibition of the students' work at Drik Picture Agency, Dhaka, 3–7 February 2012. Danielle Fusco's photographs can be accessed at: http://public-files.apps.ecu.edu.au/SCA_Marketing/coffee/coffee.html

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